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SUBJECT: STRAINS SURFACE (AGAIN) IN FICO-KUBIS RELATIONSHIP

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik, for Reasons 1.4 b and d

1. (C) Summary. Following a burst of media coverage suggesting that Foreign Minister Kubis's days in office could be numbered, signs of strained relations between Prime Minister Fico and FM Kubis were apparent, once again, during Fico's June 3 visit to the MFA. According to a senior MFA official who was present, Fico was openly critical of Kubis and the Ministry during the meeting with the Foreign Minister and MFA staff. In the subsequent press conference, Fico responded tersely to a reporter's question about Kubis's standing, saying that Kubis "as a professional" retained his trust. Although differences between the two men (in both style and substance) have been apparent since the early days of the Fico administration, Kubis's public rebuke of the Prime Minister for his attendance at Cuba's national day reception in November appears to have caused a permanent rift. Fico's biggest problem with Kubis -- the most capable and experienced minister in the government -- is that he is not perceived as sufficiently responsive to the ruling party's interests or sufficiently loyal (beholden) to the PM. While there are potential replacements waiting in the wings, Kubis's departure is not necessarily imminent. When it does take place, it will be a loss for Slovakia, because his successor is unlikely to possess Kubis's experience or skill and will be required and willing to hew more closely to PM Fico's narrow, commercially-oriented foreign policy vision. End Summary

Ministerial Rumor Mill: Kubis's Days Numbered?

2. (C) The respected Slovak daily Hospodarske Noviny on May 28 reported that Health Minister Valentovic, Labor Minister Tomanova and FM Kubis were, for varying reasons, likely to be dismissed. The case of Valentovic was cited as the most "urgent," and the article quoted a Smer leader as saying that he would resign as of June 10, if not sooner. On May 28, Fico's spokeswoman stated that "Minister Valentovic enjoys the Prime Minister's full confidence." Nevertheless, Valentovic announced his resignation on June 3. The same piece reported that Kubis's tenure is uncertain because the Smer leadership is unhappy with his personnel policies and because he is viewed as too independent and apolitical. On May 29, Kubis responded in an interview also published in Hospodarske Noviny. Kubis stated that none of these problems had been brought to his attention by the PM; he had only read about them in the media. As to the charge that there were too many Dzurinda holdovers in the MFA, Kubis responded: "But this is a normal thing. It is the civil service, is it not? I hope you do not expect me to fire two-thirds of the Foreign Ministry's civil servants...time the government changes."

A Chilly Visit...and Rapport

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13. (C) On the morning of Valentovic's resignation, PM Fico was at the MFA, conducting the first in a round of visits to assess Ministries' progress in implementing government policy. According to our contact, Fico canceled an anticipated small group meeting with Kubis and then proceeded to criticize him and the Ministry in front of MFA personnel for his public rebuke of Fico's attendance at Cuba's national day reception, for the Ministry's handling of the Kosovo issue, and for its use of a think tank (Slovak Foreign Policy Association) known for supporting the foreign policy views of the previous, Dzurinda government. Fico reportedly said that he did not want anyone talking about a review of Kosovo policy; for now, the position was that Slovakia was not recognizing Kosovo. (Note: following Kosovo's declaration of independence, the MFA had stated that it would review its position in light of developments on the ground after 120 days.) With respect to SFPA, he criticized the MFA's recent hosting of the institute's 9th annual foreign policy review conference. (Comment: Fico, President Gasparovic, and Parliament Speaker Paska were to have opened the May 14 event; in an unprecedented move, all were last-minute no-shows. In their absence, and anticipating critical comments from former PM Dzurinda, a panel speaker, Kubis appeared to have felt compelled to offer a somewhat partisan and defensive take on Slovak Foreign policy.) In a stark comment, Fico told MFA officials at the June 3 meeting that: "The MFA is a blue ministry." By this, Fico meant that the MFA is in the SDKU camp of his nemesis, former PM Dzurinda. The fact that Kubis is a career diplomat, not a member of SDKU or any political party is no shield. Kubis is not a Smerite, and his independence and his competence only serve to heighten Fico's perception that he is not sufficiently loyal. To his credit, Kubis, according to our sources, responded to Fico: "I don't ask the politics of those I hire."

Waiting in the Wings  
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14. (C) According to our MFA source, Fico would like to replace Kubis, but needs to have a good replacement at the ready. Two candidates who have been mentioned by our contacts, and in the press, are MFA Advisor Pavel Hamzik and Slovakia's envoy to the EU, Maros Sefcovic. Hamzik, a former Deputy Prime Minister, served briefly as Foreign Minister in Vladimir Meciar's government, but resigned in opposition to his policies. After the 2006 elections, Hamzik's nominations to Ambassadorial posts in Prague and Budapest were scotched by President Gasparovic, who reportedly harbors ill feelings against Hamzik for his association with Meciar (with whom Gasparovic had a dramatic falling out in the late 1990's). Hamzik is now thought to be interested in succeeding Ambassador Kacer in Washington, and it is believed that Fico would prevail over any objections on the part of Gasparovic. Our sources tell us it is up to Hamzik whether he wants to be Foreign Minister or Ambassador to Washington. Sefcovic is a dynamic young career diplomat who has reportedly excelled in Brussels. He recently told Ambassador Obsitnik that he expected to remain there for one more year to help see Slovakia through the Euro accession process. Sefcovic could be a skilled FM, but, especially under these circumstances, he would be more subservient to Fico's views than Kubis has been. Other, less promising names have been mooted, among them Juraj Horvath, a Smer MP and the party's Foreign Secretary. Despite his title, observers note that he lacks experience and depth.

Fico's Foreign Policy Vision  
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15. (C) If Fico nominates a party loyalist like Horvath, we can expect a further shift in emphasis toward a more commercially-driven, as well as a more partisan foreign policy. Fico stated at the press conference during his June 3 MFA visit: "It seems to me that with the fulfillment of the principal targets -- EU, NATO, Schengen and Lisbon -- our foreign policy appears to have lost dynamism." Fico added

that the "focus should now be on placing a greater emphasis on the economic aspect of our operations abroad," including by establishing missions in places where they can be of economic benefit to the country. He also referred more than once to the opposition's "refusal" to support the key goals of Slovak foreign policy, e.g., Lisbon Treaty ratification, and called for the Ministry to "respond" to this situation. Finally, Fico stressed the need for greater fiscal austerity and for further personnel cuts at the Ministry. According to MFA sources, not only has the MFA already cut a higher percentage of personnel than any other ministry, it is the only ministry whose budget has decreased in the past two years.

#### What's Next for Kubis?

16. (C) Comment. Kubis wants to leave on his terms, and we think he still may have enough clout and profile to manage a more graceful exit than the hapless Valentovic. We have heard from numerous contacts that Kubis -- having lost his bid to be the Special Envoy to Afghanistan -- is angling for a slot on the European Commission. Until he has a soft (and prestigious) landing, he will not take the initiative to leave. In his remaining time as Minister, however, in mid-2009 we expect he will turn in a more muted and compliant performance. He has been quiet on Kosovo, of late, for instance. While keeping his head down on hot-button issues, Kubis has focused on other priorities, e.g., Afghanistan. Slovakia's growing contribution to ISAF is largely a result of Kubis's efforts and advocacy, and that of Defmin Baska. Kubis is certainly not without flaws, and, despite his efforts, the MFA, as an institution, has been weakened during his tenure. That said -- and Afghanistan is a case in point -- Kubis takes seriously Slovakia's obligations and believes it can and should play a constructive role in the international sphere. For that reason alone, his departure -- whenever it comes -- will be a loss.

OBSITNIK